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Get BU on board for West Station transit



Boston University has resisted letting public buses from the planned West Station use a roadway on its campus.



By [Dante Ramos](#) Globe Columnist February 28, 2016

AT FIRST, IT might sound premature — maybe even insane — for anybody to be fretting now about the level of bus service at the [proposed West Station](#).

The rail stop would be [just one element](#) of a [huge, complex, multifaceted project](#) to straighten out an old, curvy section of the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston; remove a tangle of highway ramps; and free up dozens of acres of land for development and for new rail infrastructure. The state Department of Transportation won't submit its draft environmental impact review for the project until December. Even if everything goes smoothly, West Station won't be built for years.

Yet on major transportation projects, the range of options inevitably narrows long before the first blueprints are drawn up. At the moment, Boston University is averse to letting buses heading to and from West Station use a roadway through the western end of its campus.

Community groups are getting antsy, and rightly so. A hard “no” from BU, at this early stage, would limit the scope of West Station and reduce its usefulness decades into the future.

As the state works through other aspects of the Mass. Pike project, including how to pay for it, BU should reconsider. Transit advocates should keep trying to change the school’s mind, and Mayor Marty Walsh’s administration should take up the cause as well. (The project also has implications for Brookline, whose Transportation Board [will discuss it Monday night.](#))

The proposed rail station will [sit between BU and a new neighborhood on land owned by Harvard](#) and could help unite two parts of the city long separated by asphalt and train tracks. The rail stop will have bicycle and pedestrian connections to surrounding areas.

Ideally, it will also intersect with new north-south bus service connecting Harvard Square and the bustling Longwood Medical Area. Adding such a route would help fulfill the goals of the Urban Ring, a long-dreamed-of transit line that would connect job centers and residential neighborhoods around the perimeter of central Boston.

“This is a once-in-forever chance to do that,” says Allston resident Harry Mattison, who sits on a community task force that’s advising the Department of Transportation on the Mass. Pike project.

For better or worse, the most direct route from West Station would likely take buses through the area around Nickerson Field and Agganis Arena. BU has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in residences, classrooms, and recreational facilities in the western part of its campus, says [Stephen Burgay](#), the school’s senior vice president for external affairs. The school doesn’t want to see a crush of vehicles moving through areas that, he says, sometimes draw as much pedestrian traffic as Downtown Crossing.

BU’s opposition to general auto traffic makes lots of sense. But the institution hasn’t yet figured out that, over time, richer transit links at West Station will serve BU’s interests, too. And if it rules out even a bus-only route now, it’ll tie everyone’s hands. Opposition from a powerful abutter makes it harder for the state to justify a north-south busway serving West Station. Eliminating the possibility of such service in turn limits the number of people who might use the commuter rail stop once it’s built. Over the course of a long bureaucratic process, it’s possible to chip away at a bright idea like West Station so much that its basic value proposition suffers.

Meanwhile, the city could be left behind on a crucial matter of urban design. Both BU and Harvard have been focusing only on the aspects of the highway interchange plans that affect them. It’s up to the Walsh administration to make sure institutional boundaries don’t prevent a broader effort to bind together different parts of the city.

The key goal should be to keep as many options open as possible. “We’re planning for so far out,” says Jackie DeWolfe, executive director of the Livable Streets Alliance, “that we really don’t know what the world is going to look like in another five or 10 years.”

In an interview, state Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack cautions that her agency is “not even close” to planning service for a station that doesn’t even exist. She does note, though, that “we need to know enough about the potential kinds of service to design the station right.”

This is exactly why it’s important for BU to get on board sooner instead of later. Yes, it’s way too early to worry what color the floor tiles at West Station should be, or whether MBTA buses should pass by every six minutes or every 10. But it’s not too soon to decide what the basic purpose of West Station ought to be — a 21st-century multimodal transportation center, or just another commuter rail stop.

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